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ABSTRACT

The professional development strategies and activities of vocational education and training staff at further education (FE) colleges in the United Kingdom were examined through a mail survey completed by 891 staff members at 108 colleges throughout the United Kingdom (representing 24% of the FE sector). Most respondents (92%) stated that their college had a policy of supporting staff to update their skills and subject expertise, although some staff commented on the lack of a strategic view. For most respondents, the pressing issue was effective implementation of those policies. Staff generally agreed that support from their college was the most important factor in their continuing professional development (CPD). Most respondents (87%) considered their experience in industry relevant to their current teaching role. Nearly all respondents (97%) kept up-to-date through reading, and 75% kept up to date through personal research. Only 27% of respondents used work placements or secondments to the workplace for CPD. Respondents from different subject areas preferred different forms and frequencies of updating. Much of respondents' updating was done outside regular work hours. Bursary schemes that reward teachers financially for work placements appeared to motivate teachers to use holiday periods for updating. (MN)

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Developing leading-edge staff in vocational education and training

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Note
The Learning and Skills Development Agency was formerly known as FEDA.

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Foreword

The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) is delighted to add its name to this important piece of work. Ever since it was established, FENTO has been developing standards for staff who work in FE colleges throughout the United Kingdom. Our role has been to establish criteria whereby staff who work in colleges can have a framework for structured professional development and a framework for minimum qualifications.

Based on this work the government has announced a new qualification framework that will be in place in September 2001.

To complement this work, the Learning and Skills Development Agency has been considering the skills needs of college staff. Many of the challenges colleges are facing are set out in this report.

We fully support the need to have a more strategic approach to staff updating that builds on an analysis of the skills and knowledge needed to deliver high quality vocational education and training for current and future needs.

To support this FENTO has produced its first Skills Foresight report and is soon to publish its first workforce development plan. This will be the first such report for the sector and should stimulate much debate.

Colleges have an exciting and demanding future and the quality and skills of their staff lie at the heart of their success. FENTO and the Learning and Skills Development Agency, working together, will ensure that colleges are well equipped to take full advantage of that future.

Geoff Terry, Chief Executive,
Further Education National Training Organisation

Summary

Introduction

How are staff delivering vocational education and training (VET) in FE colleges keeping up to date with the changing needs of their occupational sector? This report draws on Learning and Skills Development Agency research to provide a commentary on the action needed to improve staff updating.

Background

The establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the 47 local LSCs, and their proposed involvement in workforce development through identifying and meeting skills needs, make it important to secure a coherent and comprehensive approach to skills updating for FE providers. This is essential if the workforce is to meet the needs of the local and national economy.

The government's proposals to develop centres of vocational excellence in colleges increase the importance of having a cadre of staff at the leading edge of vocational education and training.

Method

One hundred and twenty-one college principals invited VET staff to take part in a Learning and Skills Development Agency postal survey. The Agency received completed questionnaires from 891 members of staff in 108 colleges – 24% of the FE sector.

Follow-up interviews were held with 22 staff from 13 colleges.

Although the sample that responded does not exactly represent the sector's capacity to deliver vocational education and training, it does indicate the overall make-up of staff in the sector. The number of individual responses and range of college contexts also make it likely that the findings are applicable across vocational staff in the sector.

Findings

Most respondents (92%) stated that their college had a policy of supporting staff to update their skills and subject expertise, although some staff commented on the lack of a strategic view. The pressing issue for most respondents appears to be the effective implementation of those policies. Staff generally agreed that support from their college was the most important factor in their continuing professional development (CPD).

Around three-quarters of the returns (76%) were from those aged 36–55. This reflects the maturing working population overall, but may indicate an emerging problem in replacing retiring staff, especially if FE salaries do not match those in industry.

Almost half (49%) the respondents have worked in at least two colleges. Just under a half (45%) have been in the same college for more than 10 years and just over a quarter (26%) have been in the same post for over 10 years. Most job changes appear to take place within the same college.

Over half of those replying (61%) have spent more than 10 years employed in the occupational area in which they are teaching. Around one in five (22%) have had less than five years' previous occupational experience. Half of respondents with three years or less teaching experience have had more than five years' industrial experience.

Most respondents (87%) thought that their experience in industry was relevant to their current teaching role.

Nearly all respondents (97%) keep up to date through reading and three-quarters (75%) through personal research but these methods may not be the most effective. In contrast, placements or secondments to the workplace were used by less than a third (27%) of respondents, but preferred by most of them. Staff clearly see the value of a period back in industry but have little opportunity to experience it. Some felt teaching a vocational skill enabled them to keep up to date, whereas others stressed the need to return to a 'real' work environment.

Respondents from particular subject areas preferred different forms and frequency of updating. IT practitioners, for example, need particularly frequent updating, because of the rapid changes in their discipline.

Those who felt up to date in knowledge were also reasonably confident of their skills, except for health/care practitioners. Regardless of their knowledge level, they were more likely to consider that their skills needed updating. Some staff in this area do part-time work through 'nurse banks' to retain their licence to practise.

Staff commented that much of their updating was done outside timetabled hours, at weekends and during holidays. They asserted that time should be allocated to updating skills and knowledge in an appropriate setting.

Bursary schemes, which reward teachers financially for work placements, appear to encourage teachers to use holiday periods, or dedicated INSET time for updating.

The increased demands of the job and lack of 'slack' in timetables are key factors in motivating staff to take responsibility for their own continuing professional development.

Respondents stressed the need for expert training and access to industry-standard training courses. There may be scope for colleges to work with employers to secure joint CPD activities.

Conclusions and issues

Individual staff in FE colleges keep themselves up to date in a variety of ways but there is no coherent approach to updating vocational staff across the sector.

The stock of teachers with significant and recent work experience in their vocational area is diminishing. Many FE staff have not been employed directly in their industry for 5–15 years. Securing work experience for these staff is a priority.

VET staff should be up to date in skills and knowledge to the level at which they are teaching. There should be minimum standards for this, preferably endorsed by FENTO, which providers should have to meet as a condition of funding.

Opportunities for sharing staff training and updating with employers should be considered.

Organisations such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), national training organisations (NTOs), awarding bodies and the DfEE need to offer guidance and support. Appropriate structures and, possibly, a central fund for staff updating and product development are needed to secure systematic updating across the sector.

1. Introduction

How are vocational staff in further education keeping their skills up to date to meet the challenge of the skills and competitiveness agendas?

The Learning and Skills Development Agency (formerly FEDA) investigated:

- current FE practice in updating the skills and subject expertise of VET staff
- good practice in these processes
- how to achieve strategic and systematic updating across the sector.

2. Background

FE practitioners need continuing professional development if they are to contribute effectively to the development of leading-edge skills in the current and future workforce. Rapid changes in technology and working practices mean that lifelong learning is as important for them as it is for their students, especially where it relates to their specialist subject. The ability to understand and evaluate contemporary theories about learning from and at work are crucial, as is the extension of pedagogical practice to support learning in the workplace.

Earlier Agency work, *Learning with business* (Hughes 1998) involved a survey of colleges, TECs, and education and business partnerships (EBPs) to identify secondments and reciprocal arrangements between further education and industry. This resulted in a good practice framework to support the planning and implementation of these activities within a college's overall strategic objectives. *Business associates in colleges* (Johnson and Hughes 2000) investigated outward secondments and placements from business into education. These research projects reported much interesting and innovative work, but also revealed the lack of a systematic approach to updating across the sector.

Learning programmes must become more relevant to the skill needs of the local and national economy. The new Learning and Skills Council and the skills agenda of the new local LSCs, especially their proposed involvement in workforce development through identifying and meeting skill needs, make this even more important. The government's proposals to establish centres of vocational excellence and innovation increase the urgency (DfEE 2000).

For busy staff updating activities must be time and cost effective. Staff need to maximise opportunities to learn while working and to exploit everyday activities as learning activities. Formal courses may be needed but there are many other ways of updating:

- incidental contact with industry – perhaps through work experience for students, information exchange with family and friends
- providing direct training for firms
- advice and exchange of practice from professional bodies, professional literature, interest groups or networks
- action research projects – especially those that bring mutual benefits to employers and practitioners
- job shadowing/sharing – between teaching staff and their counterparts in industry.

3. Method

The Agency invited all 456 college principals in England and Wales to take part in a comprehensive survey of policy and practice on staff updating. One hundred and twenty-one principals agreed to distribute questionnaires to selected VET colleagues. The Agency advised on the preferred composition of the sample to ensure that it was representative of the staff and subject areas of the FE college sector. 891 completed questionnaires were returned from 108 colleges, representing 24% of the FE sector. Eight colleges in Wales responded with 70 returns.

Follow-up interviews were held by telephone and through face-to-face meetings with 22 staff in 13 colleges.

4. Survey findings

The survey sample is not totally representative of vocational staff in the sector but the many individual responses and the range of college contexts suggest that the findings of this report are generally applicable.

Where the survey findings are discussed below, the numbers in the tables reflect the actual numbers of responses to each question and will vary accordingly. Where appropriate, figures have been rounded up or down to the closest whole number.

Profile of respondents

Table 1 shows that most of the returns (87%) were from FE colleges with a few from sixth form (7.5%) and specialist colleges (5.5%) – in line with the overall proportion in the sector. Slightly more women, 471 (53%), responded than men, 420 (47%). Full-time staff accounted for 791 (89%) of the returns. The remaining 100 (11%) included 96 part-time staff and agency staff.

Nearly all respondents (92%) stated that there was a college policy to support staff in updating their skills and subject expertise.

Just over a quarter (28%) stated that they were responsible for arranging the professional development of colleagues.

Nearly half the returns (46%) were from the business and health/care sectors (Table 8). This reflects the relative size of provision by sector and, to some extent, changes in the national economy away from manufacturing towards service industries.

Age and length of time in post

Table 2 indicates that the vocational workforce is predominantly mature, with 76% of returns from people aged 36–55. Less than 8% are over 55.

Since less than one in five (17%) are under 36 and less than 1% under 26, most of the respondents could have had significant work experience before taking up a teaching post.

Table 3 indicates a steady turnover of around 6% of staff per year at least for the first few years in teaching. Over half the staff (55%) have been employed in the same college for less than 10 years (Table 3). Few staff now expect to spend their whole career in the same organisation.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of staff reported having worked in one other college as well as their current college (Table 4). A further 14% had worked in two other colleges. Relatively few staff had worked in more than two extra colleges. This seems to indicate that most individuals move only a few times during their career.

Just under a half (45%) of all respondents have been at the same college for more than 10 years (Table 3). Over a quarter (26%) of staff have been in the same post in the college for over 10 years (Table 5). These two statistics indicate relative stability in the workforce. However, 476 (55%) of the respondents have been in their current post for five years or less (Table 5) which is much greater than the proportion employed in their current college for that length of time (35%) (Table 3). This suggests recent job changes within colleges rather than between colleges. This is supported by the data in Table 6 which shows that of the 132 respondents in their current post for less than a year, 44 (33%) had been in the college for more than five years and 30 (23%) for 10 years or longer.

Table 6 also shows that at least 40% of staff are in the post to which they were originally recruited irrespective of the length of time in the college and less than 4% moved to their current college in the same post as in their previous college.

Although 69% of staff have been teaching for more than nine years (Table 7), most of them (75%) have only taught in their current college and one other (Table 4), again indicating limited movement between colleges.

An ageing staff profile

All subject areas show a greater percentage of staff in the 36+ age range. There is no significant variation in the age range of staff in different occupational areas with two exceptions:

- engineering has significantly more staff over 45
- agriculture has significantly fewer staff over 45 (although the sample is small).

There also appears to be a greater proportion of younger staff teaching sciences.

Over half the staff in the survey (61%) had spent 10 or more years employed in the occupational area in which they are teaching (Table 9).

Just over one-third (34.8%) of respondents have been employed in their current college for five or fewer years (Table 3). As 15.2% recorded having been employed in teaching for five or fewer years (Table 7), staff must have been recruited from outside the teaching profession. This is supported by Table 6, which shows that 53% of staff who had been in teaching for less than five years had more than five years' experience in a relevant occupation.

TABLE 1
Response rates of colleges

Type of college	Numbers	Replies: Full-time staff Male	Full-time staff Female	Other staff Male	Other staff Female	Total	%
General further education/tertiary	92	342	346	19	68	775	87.0
Sixth form	9	27	29	1	10	67	7.5
Agriculture/horticulture	5	26	14	1	1	42	4.7
Art/design and performing arts	2	4	3	0	0	7	0.8
Totals	108	399	392	21	79	891	100.0

TABLE 2
Age of respondents

Age range in years	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
Under 26	5	0	5	0.6
26–35	129	14	143	16.1
36–45	271	42	313	35.3
46–55	324	35	359	40.5
56–65	58	7	65	7.3
Over 65	0	2	2	0.2
Totals	787	100	887	100.0

TABLE 3
Time employed in current college

Time employed in current college in years	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
1 year or less	55	7	62	7.1
2	46	9	55	6.3
3	43	15	58	6.6
4–5	111	19	130	14.8
6–9	147	28	175	20.0
10–19	275	17	292	33.3
20 and over	100	4	104	11.9
Totals	791	100	891	100.0

TABLE 4
Number of colleges worked in, as well as current college

Number of other colleges	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
0	406	53	459	51.5
1	186	21	207	23.2
2	103	18	121	13.6
3	53	3	56	6.3
4	16	2	18	2.0
5	16	2	18	2.0
More than 5	11	1	12	1.3
Totals	791	100	891	99.9

TABLE 5
Time in current post

Time employed in current post in years	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
1 year or less	124	11	135	15.6
2	105	14	119	13.8
3	68	15	83	9.6
4–5	126	13	139	16.1
6–9	131	29	160	18.5
10–19	168	11	179	20.7
20 and over	47	1	48	5.6
Totals	769	94	863	99.9

TABLE 6
Time in post in current college

Time employed in teaching posts in years	Time in relevant occupation in years							
	<1	2	3	4–5	6–9	10–19	>20	Totals
1 or less	49	5	12	22	14	22	8	132
2	1	45	9	19	16	23	5	118
3	—	—	29	2	15	30	6	82
4–5	2	—	—	80	10	30	15	137
6–9	1	1	4	6	111	25	10	158
10–19	4	1	—	1	4	150	16	176
20 and over	—	1	1	1	2	1	42	48
Totals	57	53	55	131	172	281	102	851

TABLE 7
Total time employed in teaching

Time employed in teaching in years	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
1 or less	14	3	17	1.9
2	22	1	23	2.6
3	19	6	25	2.8
4–5	56	14	70	7.9
6–9	119	26	145	16.3
10–19	286	29	315	35.3
20 and over	275	21	296	33.2
Totals	791	100	891	100.0

TABLE 8
Age of staff in different occupational areas

Occupational area	Numbers in each age group					Total	%
	<26	26–35	36–45	46–55	>55		
Business	0	37	81	94	19	231	27.8
Health/Care	1	25	62	55	8	151	18.2
Engineering	0	8	31	58	13	110	13.2
Hotel and Catering	0	19	27	31	6	83	10.0
Art and Design	1	10	25	28	5	69	8.3
Sciences	1	14	14	25	3	57	6.9
Basic education	0	4	16	19	1	40	4.8
Humanities	1	5	10	15	4	35	4.2
Construction	0	2	10	13	5	30	3.6
Agriculture	1	5	16	3	0	25	3.0
Totals	5	129	292	341	64	831	100.0

TABLE 9
Time spent in working in occupational area

Time employed in occupational area in years	Full-time staff	Other staff	Total	Percentage
1 year or less	19	6	25	3.1
2	41	2	43	5.3
3	24	2	26	3.2
4–5	77	5	82	10.2
6–9	118	19	137	17.0
Totals	729	77	806	100.0

TABLE 10
Total time spent in teaching and in a relevant occupation

Time employed in teaching posts in years	Time in relevant occupation in years							Totals
	<1	2	3	4–5	6–9	10–19	>20	
1 year or less	4	0	0	3	3	3	2	15
2	0	8	1	1	0	5	5	20
3	3	2	6	1	2	3	6	23
4–5	3	4	4	14	5	13	14	57
6–9	3	8	2	22	46	36	14	131
10–19	7	10	10	21	52	130	65	295
20 and over	6	11	3	20	29	79	122	270
Totals	26	43	26	82	137	269	228	811

Regardless of their length of time in teaching, over three-quarters (78.2%) of all respondents had more than five years' previous occupational experience (Table 9). Of 'new teachers' with less than three years' teaching, half have more than five years' previous industrial experience. This proportion steadily rises with time in teaching – 85% of those employed in teaching for over 20 years claimed to have more than five years' experience in a relevant occupation.

Relevant experience

Most respondents (86.7%) thought their experience in industry relevant to their current teaching role (Table 11). A few (7.6%) did not think they were keeping up to date in the knowledge base for their occupational area (Table 12). This increased to 12.2% in relation to skills updating. Those who considered themselves up to date in knowledge also felt up to date in skills, except for staff teaching health-related courses. This may be because health/care staff need to provide evidence of recent work experience for registration purposes.

Sources of updating

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate the following sources of support on a four-point scale:

- membership of a professional body
- support from the college
- working on employer premises
- networking with colleagues
- networking with employers.

As Table 13 shows, staff considered support from the college the most important factor in continuing professional development, with 64% suggesting it was very useful.

Networking, either with colleagues or employers, was considered more important than working on employers' premises. Older staff appear to value working on employers' premises more than younger staff, perhaps because of their greater experience in industry. Responses about the value of belonging to a professional body were the most varied, possibly because of the different activities of professional bodies.

Use and preference

The survey also asked respondents about their use of and preference for particular methods of updating, again using a four-point scale. As Table 14 shows, most methods were found useful or very useful, even the five least used.

Reading was the most common form of updating, used by 97% of the 834 respondents. The least used method was secondment to industry, recorded by only 27% of respondents.

The top five methods were used by at least 80% of respondents and staff were, on the whole, content with them. College-based staff development, however, also had the highest level of dissatisfaction, with 4.4% rating it at 'not at all useful'.

Younger staff more frequently used networking with colleagues and work-based projects. Women were more positive about the more informal methods of updating and taught programmes. Men were more likely to use computer-based materials.

Use and preference by subject area

Staff from particular subject areas preferred different methods of updating. Health/care staff, for example, were more likely than engineering staff to rate networking with colleagues highly. Agriculture and construction staff rated work-based assessment and work-based projects but these were less favoured by art and design staff who preferred exhibitions.

Enabling factors

Respondents were asked an open question about the most important enabling factors in keeping updated. Their suggestions are given in Table 16.

Sector differences

Different vocational areas report specific updating needs. Some respondents felt that teaching a vocational skill enabled them to keep up to date, whereas others stressed the need to return to a 'real' work environment.

> *All staff teaching hair and beauty adopt a 'hands on' approach to training. Although it was some years ago that I worked in industry, I have taught a wide variety of subjects and therefore have kept my skills up to date.*

> *As a registered nurse I am required to continue to update through education and practice in order to retain my registration. This, although sometimes a burden, is the most important factor in keeping me 'current'.*

For some teachers, rapid changes in their industry sector or changes to their teaching load make further demands.

TABLE 11
Perceived relevance of work experience

Degree of relevance	Frequency	Percentage
None at all	17	2.0
Some	95	11.3
Quite a lot	188	22.4
Very much	541	64.3
Totals	841	100.0

TABLE 12
Perceived level of currency of knowledge and skills in occupational area

	Knowledge		Skill	
How up to date	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Very out of date	5	0.6	13	1.5
Out of date	62	7.0	92	10.7
Quite up to date	469	53.1	469	54.5
Very up to date	347	39.3	287	33.3
Totals	883	100	861	100.0

TABLE 13
Relative importance of sources of support for professional development

	Importance rating					
	Not very			Very		%
Factor	1	2	3	4	Total	of 891 replies
Membership of professional body	194	206	221	219	840	94.3
Support from college	22	56	238	564	880	98.8
Working on employer premises	105	151	287	280	823	92.4
Networking with colleagues	18	92	328	435	873	98.0
Networking with employers	44	124	295	389	852	95.6

TABLE 14
Use and preference for CPD methods

Method	Total using	% of replies	Usefulness rating Not 1	2	3	Very 4
Reading	806	97	1	34	215	556
Student feedback	693	83	4	71	265	353
College staff development	681	82	30	135	261	255
Computer	674	81	7	102	297	268
Informal contact	670	80	4	72	253	341
Networking with colleagues	657	79	9	66	270	312
Video	656	79	13	96	275	272
Visits	632	76	6	61	208	357
Personal research	626	75	4	19	175	428
Curriculum development	626	75	7	69	261	289
Conferences	614	74	12	93	236	273
Taught courses	478	58	5	39	185	249
Exhibitions	462	55	17	86	181	178
Self-study	347	42	10	42	148	147
Work-based assessment	343	41	17	43	134	149
Work-based projects	325	39	15	36	132	142
In-company training	249	30	15	22	84	128
Secondment	223	27	15	20	55	133

TABLE 15
Use of updating methods by subject area

Method	Used most by	Used least by
Reading	Agriculture	Construction
Student feedback	Construction	Agriculture
College staff development	Science	Engineering
Computer	Science	Agriculture
Informal contact	Construction	Engineering
Networking with colleagues	Humanities	Construction
Video	Health/care	Basic education
Visits	Art and Design	Science
Personal research	Art and Design	Construction
Curriculum development	Art and Design	Engineering
Conferences	Basic education	Engineering
Taught courses	Agriculture	Construction
Exhibitions	Humanities	Business
Self-study	Humanities	Construction
Work-based assessment	Agriculture	Science
Work-based projects	Construction	Science
In-company training	Agriculture	Art and design
Secondment	Hotel and Catering	Basic education

TABLE 16
The factors staff see as important in keeping up to date

Most important for updating	Number of mentions
Placements/secondments to industry	269
Time-related issues	170
Networking with colleagues/industry	91
Courses (comments related to availability/access to/location/information/range)	88
Partnerships/working with industry	85
Funding-related issues	55
'Expert' updating courses (provided by manufacturing leading-edge experts, perhaps shared with industry)	53
Skills development	51
Time for personal research	49
INSET CPD programmes	49
Support from senior management	40
Regular, possibly mandatory, updating	37
IT solutions, websites, e-mail groups, online learning	35
Books and resources	32
Less teaching/administration	31
Staff motivation	22
Policy issues (college and national)	20
Payment for staff undertaking updating	18
Link to appraisal	18
Cover	14
Support from professional bodies	9

Teaching on higher level courses such as HNC Business and ISM Diploma means there is a constant pressure to keep up to date particularly in personnel/HR related subjects.

Particularly in fast moving areas such as design, where changes are happening very quickly, contact and working practice within commercial organisations is imperative to staff keeping up to date.

In engineering, being aware of what the companies around the college are doing. The HNC students use different systems/software packages etc. and it is useful to glean information from them with discussions and talks.

Financial support [is needed] *to cover 60–75 hours' teaching time so that the staff member can visit a range of different companies (small scale to larger consultancies) to assess changes in technology and professional practice – on a regular, 4–5 yearly, basis.*

The currency of some curriculum areas, such as art and design, depends on teachers who continue to practise in their occupational area.

The time to develop your own work using college facilities [is important, for example] *experimental work and mixing media and areas of work ie screen-printing on glass, mixed-media ceramics/glass etc.*

In terms of art and design, I feel it is vital that teachers continue to develop their own work and are constantly updating their skills as new techniques become available. We encourage teachers to work part-time for this reason.

IT staff were particularly vocal about the pace of change and the difficulty of keeping updated.

In my area of computing, there is an enormous need for continually updating knowledge and skills.

In IT things move at a rapid pace – new software, etc, it is presumed staff will self-develop and keep ahead, and this happens in 'your own time' usually.

Placements

Placement, or secondment to industry, was the enabling factor mentioned most frequently. Comments included:

... there is no doubt that the single most effective piece of skills updating (for me) was the week spent at Michelin Plc, thanks to the Staffordshire Partnership project.

I have found Education Business Partnership secondments very useful. I have completed one in a manufacturing environment and this year I am in the process of arranging one in the care environment as I have recently started teaching care management. In my opinion there is no substitute for experiencing the world of work and such placements have provided me with invaluable contacts for the future and the ability to make reference to such placements in my lectures.

However, since this was the option least used by the respondents (Table 14), staff may see the value of it have little opportunity to experience it.

Many respondents also mentioned partnerships with industry and working with employers. This again suggests that they feel the need to maintain contact with their occupational area. Older staff mentioned this more often, which possibly reflects long-established contacts rather than recent initiatives.

Time-related issues

Time was the second most quoted factor, often in relation to the lack of it. Increased demands of the job and the absence of 'slack' in timetables clearly affect staff development.

Many respondents would prefer to have time dedicated to updating skills and knowledge in an appropriate setting. They commented that much now has to be done outside timetabled hours.

Undoubtedly the single most important factor that would help staff to keep their own knowledge and skills up to date is being allocated time to attend workshops and seminars.

The single most important factor is time to be made available to develop in rapidly changing vocational areas.

Apart from three days of in-house training, all of my upskilling has been in my own time.

Some staff commented that they need longer periods of time for updating their vocational skills.

Time to attend conferences/study days and to do work placements.

Allowing staff to complete placements during term time and perhaps take placements/ work experience for periods longer than one week eg 3 or 4 months.

Having the opportunity to take more time out each year to do your own research/reading.

A minimum of two weeks within a sponsor company is essential to 'experience' the working environment and witness changes in techniques.

Others noted the need to accommodate individual needs.

Allow staff a little time on their timetable to do whatever they feel they need to keep themselves up to date.

Direct contact with industry

Some staff commented on the mutually beneficial aspects of direct contact with industry.

Links with business can only be beneficial to all concerned: staff keeping up to date, students benefiting from knowledgeable tutors, business receiving students with current, market-appropriate skills.

But not all respondents were sure that this would always happen.

I feel that to go into industry and become an employee to improve your skills would be unrealistic. Many providers do not meet the standards out in the workplace. Colleges should employ staff who have a high level of industrial experience and because they are professional and motivated to automatically keep up to date.

Networking

Networking with colleagues or with employers was the third most popular factor. Nearly 80% of all respondents mentioned it, although staff from science, engineering and construction mentioned it less often.

Networking with colleagues from other FE colleges and, where possible, visits and briefings from staff in best practice colleges.

Undertake consultancy work for companies (time allocated to do this) – to allow networking, updating etc.

Courses

Taught and conference courses were frequently mentioned, but often alongside issues of staff release, cover and cost.

The most important factor is for staff to attend courses on a regular basis to update their skills.

In general, external courses are too expensive.

Industry-standard provision

Several respondents stressed the need for specialist training and courses from researchers, suppliers and manufacturers.

In-college training is too shallow.

Some of the manufacturing companies hold lecturer awareness courses that are for lecturing staff only. This is a bonus for us.

Conferences/courses targeted and focused at specific technical issues eg op-amps, CPU/memory, materials (eg plastics, new alloys), ASICs, microcontrollers, PLCs etc.

Seminars/lectures on areas of research being conducted by those whose job it is to do research.

I find the updating courses usually organised by universities often through professional bodies, eg Institute of Biology or British Association for the Advancement of Science, are excellent for keeping me up to date with theory. For more vocational courses I feel I would need more contact with industry or research.

Membership of an industry-linked professional body, which provides regular new updates and offers centre meetings to network and discuss changes, is the most important factor.

Perhaps FE staff enrolling on major manufacturers' (Ford, Vauxhall) own factory courses would help.

Some saw work placements as a major source of updating, but emphasised that they had to be at a leading-edge company, if they were to be much use.

Frequent work placements to companies that are in the forefront of technology.

It's not possible to keep up to date by secondment to an individual garage, where the most up-to-date equipment and knowledge can [only] *be fully covered for a particular make of vehicle.*

Funding and resources

Several respondents commented that they had funded themselves. Others commented on college problems allocating budgets.

Presently I am self-funding, with no support from my current employer (time or money).

Although there is a policy for staff development in the college, staffing and budget constraints do not allow staff development to take place as and when needed.

Policy and implementation
Respondents stressed the need for support from senior management and a coherent college policy linking appraisal and staff development.

The college has a very supportive staff development policy which some staff members make a great deal of use of and others don't use at all.

College managers must be seen to be giving full support to skills updates – including recognition that professional development is not merely another additional duty but one which requires appropriate support ... I am pleased to say that my college does show full commitment to development.

While policy may be in place within the college the actual enactment of this at faculty level leaves a lot to be desired.

A good link between appraisal and staff development [is required] *picking up points that are generated and leading to action.*

Central funds
Many respondents suggested that staff development should be centrally funded by government and funding bodies.

Training and development programmes provided by FEDA/awarding bodies/QCA to ensure coherency and validity of provision.

A DfEE-led policy on what all staff in a college should have, and a dedicated DfEE budget for each college.

5. Follow-up interviews

More detailed information was obtained from follow-up telephone and face-to-face interviews with 22 questionnaire respondents from 13 colleges. Interviewees were taken back through their responses and asked to expand on some of the issues.

Limited movement between colleges

One of those interviewed had taught in four different colleges in four regions of England but most had done all their teaching and vocational experience within a relatively small geographical area.

Relevance of work experience to current job

Most interviewees thought that their previous vocational experience was relevant to their current job. They considered that they were able to keep up to date in knowledge relatively easily, but that maintaining practical skills to industry standards was more difficult.

Most thought they needed to work in a commercial setting to keep up certain skills, some staff did this by operating independently from the college, as, for example, a freelance photographer, artist, caterer or nurse. Staff suggested that without this constant direct association with the vocational area their levels of knowledge and skill would be out of date in two to three years.

Not all staff considered 'time out of industry' an important issue, some interviewees thought that their college work kept them up to date. One engineering interviewee saw teaching a practical subject coupled with workplace assessment of NVQs and part-time work as an FEFC inspector as sufficient to maintain skills.

Greater college involvement with Modern Apprenticeships and NVQs also means that teachers get into the workplace more often to check on students' progress and perform work-based assessment. This often results in extra contact with managers and supervisors.

Two interviewees had no relevant work experience and were conscious that they needed to develop both their general awareness and specific industry knowledge by spending time in an appropriate workplace. In the absence of a suitable placement, one person was networking with experienced colleagues and another was working part-time in the industry.

Developing colleagues

There appears to be extensive informal peer support for staff development in colleges. Most interviewees said that they helped develop colleagues informally through acting as internal or external verifiers, taking part in various projects or curriculum development teams, trades unions or professional organisations. Staff often helped each other to become more computer literate rather than relying on IT courses. In some cases they supported colleagues in preparing bids for European or other funds.

Some respondents were responsible for staff appraisal and review. Although primarily related to the strategic objectives of the college, interviewees agreed that they also generally supported individuals' needs.

Barriers

Most interviewees thought that their industry supported teachers wanting to update through work experience. They suggested that lack of time and energy, family commitments or low motivation were the main barriers, although the increased teaching and administrative loads and absence of any quiet time in the year contributed.

Interviewees recognised that staff development requires commitment from senior management, who may themselves be constrained by other, short-term, priorities.

Some suggested that barriers to updating were frequently self-generated. Some subjects may also have more of a 'can-do' culture than others. Staff needed to meet people from other disciplines to encourage them to take part in updating.

It was suggested that those with no previous experience of industry offer less benefit to the host company than a secondee with experience, and companies may therefore be reluctant to take them on.

Different approaches to updating

Interviewees favoured self-instigated and varied updating activities. They were most positive about those that involved people – networking, interactive and one-to-one meetings – and personal research. Visual and performing arts staff considered visits, conferences and exhibitions particularly important. Taught programmes and similar activities were not generally seen as sufficiently stimulating.

Professional bodies

Most interviewees thought professional bodies were useful for keeping in touch with colleagues and developments. A few bodies, such as the Royal College of Nursing, provide the licence to practise. One interviewee, however, saw their particular professional organisation as elitist and more concerned with 'letters after the name' than support for members.

Reading, personal study and research

Trade papers, professional journals and books were considered particularly useful for updating because of their convenience – they can be read at an individual pace and time without special equipment. Printed images were considered better quality than computer-generated material.

If research is broadly defined – for example, developing projects or practical work for students, or new methods of curriculum delivery – it appears that most staff are actively engaged in it. Most staff agreed that they developed their IT skills through personal research.

Innovation in curriculum development and delivery was an opportunity for staff updating. Curriculum development teams could improve knowledge of how a particular discipline was developing and foster internal staff collaboration.

Self-study programmes were not considered particularly useful despite enabling people to work at their own pace.

College lecturers may be become increasingly involved in more formal research. The Learning and Skills Development Agency's research network was mentioned by some interviewees as a focus for research development and an excellent means of keeping up to date.

IT

Inevitably, interviewees raised issues such as the need for IT, its availability, the possibility of it breaking down and the cost of getting your own. Interviewees felt that there were not enough computers in staff rooms and offices, and that they were expected to have home PCs to use for work.

The internet, e-commerce and websites were generally considered useful for information gathering and research rather than developing specific skills. Although most staff used the internet a great deal, it was not always their preferred style of learning.

Online learning was thought more useful for those who were familiar with computer-based materials than for beginners.

CD-ROM and other computer-based individual learning packs were of some use but not enough is available. Video materials were considered most important for visual and performing arts staff, but here again, appropriate material which reflecting changes in industry practice is not always available.

College-based staff development programmes
Most interviewees thought their college provided good staff development programmes for most staff. Much of it is linked to college strategic objectives, staff appraisal and review or to national initiatives such as Key Skills and Curriculum 2000.

Some staff had compulsory in-service days devised by college senior management. Others noted the need for senior managers to take a longer-term view of staff development activity.

Courses
Interviewees commented on the lack of relevant courses, although most thought that they could be useful. One case was cited of an individual's career being redirected by good use of such courses.

Informal contacts and networking
Interviewees were positive about networking, although some felt that their colleagues might find it difficult due to lack of time. They identified a need for extensive professional networks and a possible role for the Learning and Skills Development Agency in initiating networks for specific subject areas, with regular regional meetings.

Some colleges were involved in local employer networks.

It was generally felt that the staff and business development resulting from networking could be better exploited if it were recognised as a legitimate college activity.

Visits
Visits were useful for making and maintaining personal contacts.

Conferences and exhibitions
Conferences were mainly useful for updating, briefings, social contacts and networking. Most staff preferred conferences that required their active involvement. Exhibitions were generally valued as opportunities to get out of college and obtain a wider view. However, some staff felt uncomfortable with the emphasis on selling products. It was suggested that exhibitions might be useful for demonstrating new techniques or equipment. For those involved in the visual arts, exhibitions of work were particularly valuable.

Industry and business as a learning medium
Involvement with employers and employer training is an important aspect of personal staff development for VET teachers. However, interviewees commented that there are rarely enough local opportunities for this, and some expressed reservations about being beholden to employers who see working with the college as a favour rather than a mutually beneficial exchange.

Most agreed that there were limited opportunities to exploit work-based learning and assessment for staff development. Not all staff can be involved and not all employers want this service.

In-company training
There were reservations about the contribution of staff involvement in in-company training to skills updating. In some areas colleges may be better equipped than companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises.

Secondment and work placements
Most interviewees agreed that there were not enough opportunities for secondment to industry. Even where secondments were available, they could not always be taken up because of lack of cover. Sometimes, also, because of classified or commercially sensitive information college staff were not fully accepted into a company.

Student feedback
Colleges have various systems for generating feedback from students. Most of it is linked to course development and used in college development planning but some may be relevant to staff development. Interviewees asserted that all staff involved in teaching effectively receive continuous feedback during their work with students. The extent to which this influences provision may largely depend on the individual member of staff.

College policies

All the interviewees claimed that their colleges have a flexible policy on staff development. College policy was often important in enabling staff to gain extra qualifications, both initial and higher degrees, and teaching qualifications, CLAIT, IBT2, Euro Computer Driver's Licence and HNC. In some colleges all staff had TDLB assessor training.

Implementing college policies

Several colleges had a dedicated INSET unit with cross-college responsibilities for staff development. Some interviewees reported significant negotiation on staff development activities. There was a lot of 'in-house' staff development but external events and conferences are also used, subject to budget constraints.

Although staff development activity is usually linked to corporate objectives there is scope to meet individual needs. The main problem was seen as cost. Colleges may not always fund staff development activity fully or provide cover. One member of staff had a short course paid for from the college INSET budget but could not get funding for staff cover. Another suggested that staff development, other than the five INSET days per year, was not readily available. Although requests for staff development were passed on to senior management after annual appraisal, nothing ever materialised. That college INSET programme was seen to focus on administrative issues rather than professional updating.

Specialist teachers sometimes cannot take part in development activities because specialist cover is not available and they cannot be released from their timetable commitments.

Skills and knowledge resulting from staff development often have to be 'cascaded', where the college does not support more than one person on any staff development activity.

Innovative solutions to updating

Some colleges promote the uptake of work placements by teachers through bursaries. Generally, placements are done in the staff's own time, during holidays or the development days written into contracts. In one of the colleges, the local Education Business Partnership (EBP) encourages staff to take part in industry placements that:

- enable staff who have not worked in industry for some time to cope with change and keep up to date
- enable people from industry to become involved in the college
- may result in useful teaching materials or live projects.

The EBP offers a bursary of £200 for work placements. One was piloted during 1998/99, followed by seven during 1999/2000. The college lecturers' contract has a 10-day allowance for professional development, which can be used for the placement. Placements usually take place in the half-term break, which minimises disruption to college students.

Placement activities vary – especially within small companies – and teachers need to take part in organising them. Most placements result in a student assignment, so teachers go into a wide range of industries to match the assignment material to the interests of the students.

Bursaries were considered very effective. The money is enough to be an incentive and shows that the college recognises the importance of the activities.

Using the bursary scheme

A teacher who trained as an accountant in the USA is now teaching on accountancy courses. She wants to find out more about practice in chartered accountancy in this country and also needs to develop business contacts to keep up to date with developments. Her teaching load of 25 hours a week makes it difficult to organise placements and get involved in networking.

The bursary scheme will enable her to use the summer for a one-week work placement. She would prefer a longer placement and would also like to be involved in an exchange programme with people in her occupational area. This was much more common in the States, where business–education links are stronger. She noted that opportunities for reciprocal research are not developed in this country.

Ideally, she would like to take part in knowledge updating in relation to her subject, such as new legislation etc, through regular seminars for people in the business, plus good contacts on whom she can call to find out about business practice. She cites the benefits as a better feel for the needs of business community, greater awareness of skills needs and stronger likelihood of her students finding jobs.

Involving students

Teachers can also learn a great deal about business and industry through projects involving student activity.

Involving students

In one college, a building society worked with A-level Economics and GNVQ Advanced students to research a new product range. The building society wanted to move into a new market in housing for young people and needed to research and speak to this cohort.

Students from the college designed and delivered a questionnaire, and took part in focus groups. College staff facilitated the focus groups and were involved in preparation and analysis of the questionnaire. They learned a great deal about product development and marketing techniques and the students were exposed to a professional work environment.

The building society now sees the students as potential employees and has sponsored college resources. Some of the students now work there.

Organisational development

Industry placements can also provide ideas for organisational development.

Stimulating organisational development

During a placement with Michelin one college senior manager learned a lot from their attitude to human resource development. The company is very forward- thinking and invests in staff who are likely to move to another function in the company, perhaps in another country. They actively prepare staff for new opportunities, albeit for the longer term.

The college manager used this experience to contribute to the development of college personnel practice.

Important factors

Most interviewees thought that keeping up to date was vital for their credibility with students. They claimed to have no problem updating knowledge and theory but to find practical skills more difficult. Much depended on individual motivation. Most felt they needed regular periods back in business, and suggested a range of optimal times, from two hours a week to a six weeks' secondment every three to four years. Vocational staff generally agreed that re-training and updating were necessary and that updated skills should need to be demonstrated.

One interviewee who was involved in sport and leisure suggested that colleagues needed to exercise every day (in addition to any college-based activity) and spend at least one hour a week in a professional aerobics environment.

Hospital nurse banks were important for enabling registered nurses to keep up to date.

It was proposed that senior managers who do not support staff development should be held to account. College inspections and awarding bodies could penalise colleges that do not provide adequate staff development.

Colleges need to recognise and credit the time staff spend in professional development. However, time is clearly the big issue. As one interviewee noted:

> *The college has a system whereby time is set aside each week for quality procedures and course team meetings – this is at least one hour per week of reduced teaching time.*
>
> *It would be valuable if another hour a week (or the equivalent) were set aside from teaching time for staff development. Currently staff are teaching about 25 hours a week. Reducing the timetable by one hour per week or a half-day per term or some kind of sabbatical arrangement would be helpful.*

Whole-team attendance at events was proposed, rather than single representatives. Teams could then produce a combined report eg technicians and teaching staff could provide a multifaceted view of online learning workshops.

Some thought that FE should develop a research model similar to HE. Others would like to see a system where the Education Business Partnership acted as a broker for staff placements, with money to cover the costs.

Many thought that colleges should be encouraged to develop outreach activities incorporating NVQ training, with staff seconded into companies as training officers.

One interviewee suggested that recruiting younger VET staff was particularly difficult because of the lack of career structure and the salary scales. They suggested that it was often easier to recruit people over 50, after redundancy or early retirement who might have a pension or other additional income.

6. Conclusions and issues

The stock of teachers with significant and recent work experience in their vocational area is diminishing. This is particularly disturbing since the government is looking to FE colleges to underpin the development of a skilled and competent workforce to sustain economic competitiveness.

VET staff need appropriate recent experience in the occupational area in which they are teaching. This is crucial to the development of a quality VET system. The Agency survey indicates that significant numbers of FE staff have not been employed directly in their industry for 5–15 years. Securing work experience for these staff is a priority.

The project aimed to identify good practice in skills updating and found many examples of teachers making considerable individual effort. Some staff observe and discuss developments in their subject through incidental contact with employers in relation to assessment procedures or students' work placements. Others take part-time work in the industry. Although staff would like to spend more time back in an appropriate vocational area, secondments or placements into industry are still relatively uncommon.

However, there are few examples of sustained corporate efforts or innovative staff development methods and there is no systematic approach to updating vocational staff across the sector.

In some subject areas, the absence of systematic updating is likely to have a significant impact on the relevance of courses. Teachers in areas with rapid technological change such as IT, require regular and frequent updating.

Similarly, some staff, such as those teaching health-related subjects, need to continue to work in hospitals if they are to retain their licence to practise. For many of these people, maintaining their skills is so important that they invest their own time in remaining up to date. It may be interesting to investigate how this concept could transfer to other occupational areas.

Teachers have longer teaching hours but reduced class contact with individual courses, plus extra administrative duties. This increases demand on them and reduces the time they have for staff development. Even when cover is available, staff may be reluctant to lose valuable time with their students. Traditional forms of staff development usually involve more work for already busy people, as well as time for travel and overnight stays, if the activity takes place outside college. This might be seen as less of a burden if colleges were to acknowledge that the activity was important, through bursaries, accreditation or clear links to better pay and promotion.

In the longer term, however, delivering education and training will demand a heightened professionalism of subject and pedagogic expertise. This will require a different perception of the way lecturers' time is used, with more emphasis on research and problem-solving.

College-based staff development programmes are not necessarily the best way to keep specialist staff up to date, as they tend to lack depth and focus. Vocational staff would benefit from industry-specific training to industry standards.

Networking with colleagues in colleges and in industry is an important for keeping up with developments in vocational areas. However, few staff seem to recognise the need to develop a dialogue with people working in their subject and related occupational areas.

The sector needs appropriate structures to secure systematic updating throughout. A central fund for staff updating and product development should also be considered.

Staff updating requires a more strategic approach, built on an analysis of the skills and knowledge for current and future needs. This could be supported by reference to the FENTO standards. All staff should regularly complete an individual training needs analysis and receive the necessary support to meet the needs identified.

Managers should include updating strategies within their business plans and encourage and support their staff to take them up. VET staff should be up to date in skills and knowledge appropriate to the level at which they are teaching. Minimum expectations for this should be laid down and providers should be required to demonstrate that VET staff are competent and up to date as a condition of funding, and the currency of staff skills should be a major aspect of self-assessment and inspection.

A range of CPD opportunities is required to take account of the individual requirements and learning preferences. Managers should reflect on all opportunities for and provide systematic, planned and resourced staff development opportunities.

For some subject areas, there may be no substitute for 'hands-on' involvement and direct observation in the workplace. However, casual contact with people working in the sector and formal seminars where practice is described or demonstrated may also be useful. Sharing staff training and updating with local employers – who may have similar time and cost constraints – should also be considered.

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FE practitioners, especially specialist VET staff, need lifelong learning as much as their students – how else are they to meet the challenge of the skills and competitiveness agenda? In *Developing leading-edge staff in vocational education and training* the Learning and Skills Development Agency investigates levels of current skills and knowledge across the sector, shares examples of good practice and suggests how updating might be systematically and strategically implemented.

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